Rules of the Game

All About Sneak Attacks (Part Four)

By Skip Williams

Let's wrap up All About Sneak Attacks with a look at volley type attacks, weapons and armor, spells, and a totally unofficial rule regarding flanking.

Volley Type Attacks

Sometimes, you make multiple attack rolls as part of the same attack, such as when you use the Manyshot feat. When you do so, only the first attack in the volley can be a sneak attack.

Weapons and Armor Used in Sneak Attacks

You can make sneak attacks with any weapon you can wield. The weapon does not have to be on the rogue weapon list. As noted earlier in this article series and in the rogue class description, you cannot make a sneak attack if you take the -4 penalty to make a weapon that deals lethal damage deal nonlethal damage (or vice versa), because you're deliberately not using the weapon in the optimal way. You can make a sneak attack, however, when you're not proficient with a weapon -- nonproficient use isn't exactly "optimal" but is close enough for a sneak attack.

Likewise, the armor you wear has no effect on your ability to sneak attack, though any combat penalties you suffer for nonproficient armor or shield use still apply to your attacks.

Spells as Sneak Attacks

Any spell that requires an attack roll and deals damage can be used in a sneak attack. In this case "damage" is normal damage, nonlethal damage, ability damage, or energy drain. You can sneak attack with a *Melf's acid arrow* spell, but not with a *magic missile* spell.

Ranged spells are effective as sneak attacks only at ranges of 30 feet or less (just like any other ranged sneak attack).

A successful sneak attack with a weaponlike spell inflicts extra damage according to the attacker's sneak attack ability, and the extra damage dealt is the same type as the spell deals. For example, a 10th-level rogue who makes a successful sneak attack with a *Melf's acid arrow* spell inflicts 2d4 points of acid damage, plus an extra 5d6 points of acid damage from the sneak attack (note that continuing damage from this spell is not part of the sneak attack). Spells that inflict energy drains or ability damage deal extra negative energy damage in a sneak attack, not extra negative levels or ability damage. For example, a 10th-level rogue who makes a successful sneak attack with an *enervation* spell deals 1d4 negative levels plus an extra 5d6 points of negative energy damage.

If the sneak attack with a weaponlike spell results in a critical hit, the damage from the spell is doubled but the extra sneak attack damage is not doubled (as with any sneak attack).

With spell effects that allow you to make multiple attack rolls, such as the *energy orb* spells or the Split Ray feat from *Tome and Blood,* you must treat the effect like a volley -- only the first attack can be a sneak attack.

A Totally Unofficial Rule for Dealing with Foes Trying to Flank You

Jonathan Tweet (co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd edition game) and I have had many opportunities to ponder the tactical aspects of flanking and what you might be able to do about it if you find yourself flanked. After one extended discussion not long ago, Jonathan proposed the basics of the following rule, and I present it here, with some tweaks:

You can disregard attacks from an opponent flanking you. When you do, that opponent doesn't get the +2 flanking bonus when attacking you and that opponent does not provide a flanking bonus to any of its allies. Ignoring a flanker, however, provokes an attack of opportunity from that flanker, and you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class against that flanker. You do, however, continue to threaten that flanker.

If the flanker is out of attacks of opportunity, you can ignore the flanker (and deny the flanking bonus) with impunity.

If you can't see (or locate) the flanker, you disregard the flanker by default, and you provoke the attack of opportunity.

You must make the decision to disregard a flanker as soon as the foe moves into a flanking position. You can change your decision as a free action on your turn. (You still must disregard a flanker you can't see.)

Designer's Notes: This rule gives certain creatures the option to ignore flankers when they don't pose any real danger to them. Lycanthropes facing foes that aren't armed with silver weapons, as well as characters with very high Armor Classes facing much weaker foes, can soften the effects of being surrounded. Many other creatures can use the rule to limit sneak attacks against them, but at the risk of extra attacks of opportunity from other foes. This rule also means that you often cannot provide a flanking bonus to your allies if you're out of attacks of opportunity (though foes may have a hard time determining exactly when that situation occurs).

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has been the Sage of ***Dragon*** *Magazine* since 1986. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (his borscht gets rave reviews).

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